

# An “Italian Citizen of Jewish Race”: Primo Levi on Belief, Blasphemy and Becoming a Jew

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**Abstract:** *While religious belief is not a dominant theme in Levi’s Holocaust writing, over the course of a forty-year writing career this longstanding nonbeliever offers a number of thoughtful reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust. The first half of my paper examines the Jewish identity of the young Levi, as well as the isolated thoughts on God, faith, and religion found in *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947). While that early work deliberately focuses on day-to-day exigencies amidst the unrelenting struggle for existence at Auschwitz-Monowitz, it still raises provocative questions about prayer and belief in the context of the Holocaust. In his later writing and interviews, Levi digs deeper and with greater frequency into matters concerning God and the Holocaust. From the recurring charge of “blasphemy” to his career-long characterization of his unlikely survival as a matter of simple luck rather than Divine Providence, my paper goes on to examine the later Levi’s increasingly subtle reflections on matters related to God and the Holocaust. Finally, I look at the later Levi’s repeated insistence that the years of persecution brought with them a newfound understanding of himself as a Jew. By examining his thoughts on how his Auschwitz imprisonment simultaneously confirmed his nonbelief and inaugurated his self-conception as a Jew, my paper demonstrates that Levi’s scattered reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust are both challenging and well worth our careful, continued study.*

**Keywords:** Primo Levi, Holocaust, God, Faith, Jew

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## Introduction

Primo Levi, a self-described “Italian citizen of Jewish race,” was twenty-four years old when he was deported to Auschwitz-Monowitz in 1944. Written largely in 1946, his harrowing account of his time in the camp, *Survival in Auschwitz*, is one of the earliest and most enduring examples of survivor testimony. While this early work contains few reflections on God,

faith, and the Holocaust, it is not altogether silent on these matters; matters Levi would explore further in his writings and interviews in the 1970s and 1980s. The first section of my paper reviews Levi's early life, until the time of his deportation to Auschwitz in February 1944. Particular attention is paid to the young Levi's Jewishness. The second part of my paper focuses on the eleven months Levi was a prisoner and slave laborer. Concentrating primarily on recollections in *Survival in Auschwitz*, we see that while that early volume devotes little space to questions concerning God and religious faith, what it does have to say on this topic is powerful and provocative.

The third section of my paper explores Levi's more extended treatments of questions concerning God and the Holocaust in the 1970s and 1980s. It is in his final book, 1986's *The Drowned and the Saved*, and several interviews of the period, that one finds Levi's most sustained and thoughtful reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust in general, and the impact of the years of persecution on his own nonbelief specifically. The later Levi writes: "The experience of the Lager [camp] with its frightful iniquity confirmed me in my nonbelief. It prevented, and still prevents me from conceiving of any form of Providence or transcendent justice."<sup>1</sup> Finally, my paper examines the effect of persecution and imprisonment on Levi's own Jewish identity. In a thought-provoking 1986 interview he observes: "If it hadn't been for the racial laws and the concentration camp, I'd probably no longer be a Jew, except for my last name ... [but] at this point I am a Jew, they've sewn the Star of David on me and not only on my clothes."<sup>2</sup> By examining Levi's thoughts on how his Auschwitz imprisonment simultaneously confirmed his nonbelief and inaugurated his self-conception as a Jew, my paper endeavors to consider an infamous story from a fresh perspective.

## Youth

Primo Michele Levi was born in 1919 in Turin, Italy. His ancestors immigrated to Italy centuries earlier to escape the Spanish Inquisition. Of course, being from Italy sets Levi apart from most Holocaust victims and Holocaust writers. More than once he noted that being an Italian speaker unfamiliar with Yiddish was a marked disadvantage at Auschwitz. While his mother's side of the family was more religious than his father's, Levi was raised

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<sup>1</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, 67–68.

in a middle-class, liberal, secular, integrated Jewish home.<sup>3</sup> More than once, Levi describes his childhood and his family as “95% Italian and 5% Jewish.”<sup>4</sup> Biographer Ian Thomson notes that while “the most important Jewish festivals were celebrated by the Levis. This was done less to worship God than to gather relatives for food and entertainment.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, “the prevailing tone in the Levi family,” according to Thomson, “was one of irreligion.”<sup>6</sup>

In any event, young Primo was a gifted student. He skipped a grade in elementary school and was typically the youngest and smallest boy in his class. This may partly explain his quiet, shy disposition. He was often teased by classmates: sometimes, simply for being Jewish. Levi notes in an interview from the 1980s: “As a Jew, I’d been made fun of by my schoolmates: not beaten up, or insulted, but made fun of, yes.”<sup>7</sup> After two years of preparation at Hebrew school, the thirteen-year-old Levi had his Bar Mitzvah in 1932. It was at this point in his life that he briefly professed to believe in God and vowed to be an observant Jew. Years later he would attribute his short-lived religiosity to his grandparents’ promise of a bicycle. “Once Levi had obtained his bicycle, however, he became indifferent to God.”<sup>8</sup> As we will see, Levi will remain, if not *indifferent* to God, a nonbeliever in God, for the rest of his life.

In 1938, when Levi was a nineteen-year-old university student, fascist Italy, eager to please Nazi Germany, enacted its notorious *Leggi Razziali* (Race Laws). Among other restrictions, Jews were forbidden to marry “Aryans” and banned from teaching at and attending public schools and universities. Fortunately for Levi, Jews in their second year of university and beyond were permitted to complete their degrees. (His younger sister would have to wait until after the war to attend university.) In 1940 Levi attended lectures at Turin’s Jewish School on the Zionist thinker Theodor Herzl. While the darkening skies over Europe led some of his friends to discuss escaping to Palestine, the thoroughly integrated Levis were not yet willing to leave Turin. In 1941 the twenty-two-year-old Levi graduated *summa cum laude* in chemistry from the University of Turin. The phrase “Of Jewish Race” appeared on his diploma.

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<sup>3</sup> While commentators routinely describe Levi and his family as “assimilated” Jews, Nancy Harrowitz makes a convincing case that such characterization is misleading. She notes that the Latin root of “assimilate”—*assimilatio*—suggests an “abandonment” of Jewishness that was simply not the case in the Levi household. She proposes that “integrated” or “secular” Jew more accurately describes his cultural identity. Harrowitz, “Primo Levi’s Jewish Identity,” 17.

<sup>4</sup> Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 32, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 43.

In the summer of 1943, Allied soldiers landed in Italy. Though the Allied invasion led to the fall of Mussolini and Italy's surrender to the Allies, German troops soon occupied much of north and central Italy and installed Mussolini as the leader of a new fascist puppet-state—the Italian Social Republic—in German-controlled Italy. The situation of Turin's Jews worsened. That winter, Levi and several friends left Turin in search of anti-fascist partisans in the mountains. With precious little experience, equipment, or planning, this small band of young men and women were arrested by fascist militia in northwest Italy on December 13, 1943. Reflecting years later, it was never the intention of the bookish Levi to shoot it out with the Fascists or the Germans. "I was a young bourgeois pacifist and I'd rather have died than shoot anyone."<sup>9</sup> Levi also makes it clear that the reason he told the militia men he was "Jewish" rather than an anti-fascist in search of Resistance fighters in the mountains had nothing to do with religious faith or a strong self-conception as Jew. He writes: "During the interrogation that followed, I preferred to admit my status of 'Italian citizen of Jewish race.' I felt that otherwise I would be unable to justify my presence in places too secluded even for an evacuee; while I believed (wrongly as was subsequently seen) that the admission of my political activity would have meant torture and certain death."<sup>10</sup>

Levi and several companions were brought to a detention camp at Fossoli near Modena. Compared to what was to come, the prisoners at the Fossoli camp were treated reasonably well. In early 1944 German SS troops arrived and took over administration of the camp. Levi writes: "We learned that on the following day the Jews would be leaving. All the Jews, without exception. Even the children, even the old, even the ill. Our destination? Nobody knew."<sup>11</sup> On February 21, 1944, Levi was one of 650 Jewish men, women, and children loaded into twelve railway cars destined for Monowitz, one of the three main camps at Auschwitz.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 124.

<sup>10</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 13.

In a 1972 interview with British television, Levi elaborated on this incident. The Fascists told him: "If you're a rebel we'll put you up against the wall—if you're a Jew we'll send you to a camp here in Italy ... Nothing will happen to you." Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Upon the liberation of Auschwitz in late January 1945, only twenty of the 650 deportees from Fossoli were still alive.

## Prisoner #174517

"I too entered the Lager as a nonbeliever, and as a nonbeliever I was liberated and have lived to this day."<sup>13</sup>

In his first day as a prisoner at Auschwitz, a parched Levi reaches through a barrack window for an icicle, only to have it abruptly snatched away by a guard. "Why?" asks the naïve new arrival. "Here there is no why" says the "large, heavy guard" as he shoves Levi back inside.<sup>14</sup> As it does so often, *Survival in Auschwitz* then recalls a scene from Dante's *Inferno* to help communicate something of the Auschwitz prisoner experience. "No sacred face will help thee here! It's not a Serchio bathing-party."<sup>15</sup> This demonic taunt from Canto XXI of the *Inferno* is the first of very few references to the divine in *Survival in Auschwitz*. "Here there is no why" is the earliest and one of the most important lessons Levi learned at Auschwitz: that if one hoped to survive the camp's unrelenting struggle for existence, it was better to focus one's energies on immediate, day-to-day necessities, rather than searching for answers to what might be called "ultimate" questions: Why such cruelty? Why the Jews? Where is God?, etc.

Years after his liberation, Levi wrote of new prisoners, especially "cultivated" men, struggling to "understand" Auschwitz through the familiar lenses of "history, logic, and morality."<sup>16</sup> Levi, however, cautions that "logic and morality made it impossible to accept an illogical and immoral reality; they engendered a rejection of reality which as a rule led the cultivated man rapidly to despair."<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, Levi concludes that "the act of 'not trying to understand' was the first wise dictum one had to learn in the Lager; to try and understand there, on the spot, was a futile effort ... a waste of energy that it

<sup>13</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 145.

<sup>14</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 29. In Canto XXI (46–51) of the *Inferno*, Dante tells of a new arrival in Hell from Lucca, on the Serchio River in Tuscany:

Down bobbed the sinner, then up in a writhing knot;  
But the fiends beneath the archway yelled as he rose up:  
"No Sacred Face will help thee here! It's not  
A Serchio bathing-party! Now then, toes up  
And dive! 'Ware hooks! To save thyself a jabbing,  
Stay in the pitch, nor dare to poke thy nose up!" (Dante, *Hell (L'inferno)*, 202).

<sup>16</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 142.

<sup>17</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 143.

would have been more useful to invest in the daily struggle against hunger and fatigue.”<sup>18</sup>

Several pages later, Levi notes that he seldom had time to think of death while a prisoner. “I almost never had the time to devote to death. I had many other things to keep me busy—finding a bit of bread, avoiding exhausting work, patching my shoes, stealing a broom, or interpreting the faces around me.”<sup>19</sup> The same can be said about having little time to devote to ultimate questions, including questions related to God, while a prisoner. Accordingly, *Survival in Auschwitz*—written largely in 1946, in the immediate aftermath of his imprisonment, when its author was twenty-seven years old—has little to say about God and religious faith. As we see below, however, decades later, Levi *will* have the time for considering some of the ultimate questions raised by the Holocaust. But before turning to these end-of-career reflections, it is well to look at the early *Survival in Auschwitz*’s most memorable treatment of God, faith, and suffering.

One of the more grueling episodes in *Survival in Auschwitz* is described in Chapter 13 (titled “October 1944”). There, Levi calmly describes a “selection” periodically conducted by the SS to eliminate prisoners deemed no longer suitable for labor. Each prisoner in Levi’s barrack is handed an index card containing his number, name, profession, age, and nationality. The prisoners are then made to run naked past several SS men who—“in a fraction of a second”<sup>20</sup>—assign each man’s card to one of two piles. One pile represents those prisoners deemed suitable for further labor. The other, those men condemned to die. Says Levi: “In three or four minutes a hut of two hundred men is ‘done,’ as is the whole camp of twelve thousand men in the course of the afternoon.”<sup>21</sup> Dozens of men in Levi’s barrack have been sentenced to death. Cruelly, the doomed men remain in the barrack two or three days until arrangements are made for them to “leave for the gas.”<sup>22</sup> Levi writes: “Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen.”<sup>23</sup> The typically dispassionate Levi grows angry with Kuhn and his prayers.

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<sup>18</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 142–43, italics mine.

<sup>19</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 128.

<sup>21</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 129.

Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?<sup>24</sup>

Chapter 13 ends with the book's most provocative remark: "If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn's prayer."<sup>25</sup> When we recall that *Survival in Auschwitz* is known for its remarkably calm, composed, and clinical writing style, Levi's angry treatment of Kuhn and his prayers—prayers of gratitude despite the abomination of the "selection"—is especially striking.<sup>26</sup> Given the popularity of *Survival in Auschwitz*, this powerful story is well known to generations of students and general readers. Far less known, however, is Levi's *return* to the selection story forty years later.

### Ultimate Questions

Levi's final book, 1986's *The Drowned and the Saved*, finds its author largely adopting a more abstract, "philosophical" approach to the Holocaust than the eyewitness reportage of the early *Survival in Auschwitz*.<sup>27</sup> This later

<sup>24</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 129–30.

<sup>25</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 130.

<sup>26</sup> In a 1986 interview, Levi addresses the absence of emotion in his Holocaust writing: I believe in reason and discussion as the supreme instruments of progress. Thus, when describing the tragic world of Auschwitz, I have deliberately assumed the calm and sober language of the witness, not the lamenting tones of the victim or the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge. I thought that my account would be more credible and useful the more it appeared objective, the less it sounded overly emotional; only in this way does a witness in matters of justice perform his task, which is that of preparing the ground for the judge. The judges are my readers ("Primo Levi's Heartbreaking, Heroic Answers to the Most Common Questions He Was Asked About 'Survival in Auschwitz'").

<sup>27</sup> Page 145 of *The Drowned and the Saved*, for example, finds Levi discussing Hegel's "deification [of] the State," Heidegger's attraction to Nazism, and asking the troubling questions: "Why were the moribund packed in cattle cars? Why were the children sent to the gas?" On the different tone of Levi's later Holocaust writing, Lawrence Langer notes: "He had gained a perspective that allowed him to write with broader authority than had been available to him in *If This Is a Man* [*Survival in Auschwitz*], which he finished during the year following his liberation.

work's revisiting of *Survival*'s "selection" story is at once more substantive and more personal. Levi writes:

I must nevertheless admit that I experienced (and again only once) the temptation to yield, to seek refuge in prayer. This happened in October 1944, in the one moment I lucidly perceived the immanence of death: when, naked and compressed among my naked companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the 'commission' that with one glance would decide whether I should go immediately into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instant I felt the need to ask for help and asylum; then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: one does not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, not when you are losing. A prayer under these circumstances would have been not only absurd (what right would I claim? and from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a nonbeliever is capable. I rejected that temptation: I knew that otherwise, were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it.<sup>28</sup>

While this end-of-career treatment of the selection story is far less familiar than the account offered in Levi's bestselling first book, both reveal an acute awareness of the problematic character of prayer at Auschwitz (with respect to the October 1944 selection in particular, and the arbitrary character of life and death in the camp more generally). The believer Kuhn's prayers trouble the young Levi insofar as they are offered in thanks for the outcome of a grotesque episode that can only be described as an "abomination." And had the unabashed, longstanding nonbeliever Levi asked for God's "help and asylum" during the selection, prayers under such circumstances would also be deeply problematic. Indeed, such a prayer would be "blasphemous, obscene," impious, and shameful. This notion of a nonbeliever's "impiety" and "blasphemy"—not from the hypothetical perspective of a believer, but from a nonbeliever looking within himself—is undoubtedly one of the most interesting motifs in Levi's scattered reflections on religion and the Holocaust.

Tellingly, this is not the only time the later Levi levels the charge of "blasphemy" with respect to God and Auschwitz. Earlier in *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi reflects on another, equally personal incident involving God, the Holocaust, and religious belief.

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If in the beginning his role was to bear witness, in the end it included the need to weigh issues like cruelty, responsibility, and judgment" (Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust*, 34–35).

<sup>28</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 145–46.

After my return from imprisonment, I was visited by a friend older than myself, mild and intransigent, the cultivator of a personal religion, which, however, always seemed to me severe and serious. He was glad to find me alive and basically unhurt, perhaps matured and fortified, certainly enriched. He told me that my having survived could not be the work of chance, of an accumulation of fortunate circumstances (as I did then and still do maintain) but rather of Providence. I bore the mark, I was an elect: I, the nonbeliever, and even less of a believer after the season of Auschwitz, was a person touched by Grace, a saved man. And why me? It is impossible to know, he answered. Perhaps because I had to write, and by writing bear witness: Wasn't I in fact then, in 1946, writing a book about my imprisonment?

Such an opinion seemed monstrous to me. It pained me as when one touches an exposed nerve and kindled the doubt I spoke of before: I might be alive in the place of another, at the expense of another ... The "saved" of the Lager were not the best, those predestined to do good, the bearers of a message: what I had seen and lived through proved the exact contrary. Preferably the worst survived, the selfish, the violent, the insensitive, the collaborators of the "gray zone," the spies ... the worst survived, that is, the fittest; the best all died.<sup>29</sup>

Levi returns to the opinions of this Christian friend in a 1980s interview with Ferdinando Camon, and again raises the specter of "blasphemy": "He's a believer but not a Catholic; he came to see me after my release to tell me I was clearly one of the elect, since I'd been chosen to survive in order for me to write *Survival in Auschwitz*. And this, I must confess, seemed to me a blasphemy, that God should grant privileges, saving one person and condemning someone else."<sup>30</sup> Of course, the "blasphemy" Levi here associates with the beliefs of his religious friend differs from the "blasphemy" and "impiety" Levi insists he himself would have been guilty of had he prayed to God for "help and asylum" during the SS "selection" of October 1944, insofar as the latter refers to the

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<sup>29</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 82. In a 1973 piece, Levi notes: "A Lager proverb says: 'An honest prisoner doesn't live more than three months'" (from the essay "The Europe of The Lagers" in Levi, *Auschwitz Testimonies*, 131). The divisive idea of the "best" prisoners dying earlier and in greater numbers than the "worst"—those willing to collaborate, compromise, and prioritize their own survival above all else—is a recurring one in Levi's work. See also Chapter 9 (also titled "The Drowned and the Saved") of Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*.

<sup>30</sup> Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, 68.

almost-prayers of a longstanding nonbeliever. Indeed, as noted, Levi insists that such a “blasphemous” prayer would be “laden with the greatest impiety of which a nonbeliever is capable.”<sup>31</sup>

Revealingly, the nonbeliever Levi also employs explicitly religious terminology in one of his earliest post-Auschwitz writings. In March 1946, little more than a year after his liberation, the twenty-six-year-old Levi was pleased to learn that the student Jean Samuel—who figures prominently in the Dante-focused Chapter 11 (“The Canto of Ulysses”) of *Survival in Auschwitz*—was still alive. He and Levi promptly exchanged letters. In one of them, Levi writes: “It’s a miracle that I’m still alive and in good health and reunited with my family. I’ve made a vow to never forget this, and I repeat it to myself every day like a prayer. Not that I thank Providence: if there had been Providence, Auschwitz and Birkenau would never have existed.”<sup>32</sup>

Levi revisits this theological theme forty years later in his interview with Camon. Speaking of God, religion, and the Holocaust, Levi declares: “I must say that for me the experience of Auschwitz has been such as to sweep away any remnant of religious education I may have had.”

Camon: “Meaning that Auschwitz is proof of the nonexistence of God?”

Levi: “There is Auschwitz, and so there cannot be God.”<sup>33</sup>

Levi’s end-of-career Holocaust theology could not be more stark: Auschwitz existed, therefore God and Divine Providence cannot. On the topic of Levi, God, and the Holocaust, fellow survivor Elie Wiesel writes:

He had seen too much suffering not to rebel against any religion that sought to impose a meaning upon it. I understood him, and asked him to understand me, for I had seen too much suffering to break with the past and reject the heritage of those who had suffered ... for Primo Levi, the problem of faith after Auschwitz was posed in stark terms: Either God is God and therefore all-powerful and hence guilty of letting the murderers do as they pleased, or his power is limited, in which case he is not God.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 146.

<sup>32</sup> Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 218–19.

<sup>33</sup> On the typescript he added in pencil: “I don’t find a solution to this dilemma. I keep looking, but I don’t find it” (Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, 68).

<sup>34</sup> Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, 82–83.

If not to Divine Providence, to what *does* the longstanding nonbeliever attribute his survival? With marked consistency over a forty-year writing career, his answers to this question return again and again to sheer “luck.” Indeed, the very first sentence of *Survival in Auschwitz* reads: “It was my *good fortune* to be deported to Auschwitz in 1944, that is, after the German government had decided, owing to the growing scarcity of labor, to lengthen the average life-span of the prisoners destined for elimination; it conceded noticeable improvements in the camp routine and temporarily suspended killings at the whim of individuals.”<sup>35</sup> The fact that he begins his famous account of his dehumanizing year at Auschwitz by noting his “good fortune” to arrive when he did, says much both about Levi’s modesty and his nonbelief.

As noted, in its rejection of the very idea that his survival was a matter of “Providence,” *The Drowned and the Saved* forty years later instead characterizes it as “the work of chance, of an accumulation of fortunate circumstances.”<sup>36</sup> And in an interview conducted months before his death, Levi is again explicit in his belief that simple “luck” was the primary reason for his survival: “As for survival, this is a question that I put to myself many times and that many have put to me. I insist there was no general rule, except entering the camp in good health and knowing German. Barring this, luck dominated. I have seen the survival of shrewd people and silly people, the brave and the cowardly, “thinkers” and madmen. In my case, luck played an essential role.”<sup>37</sup> While surely disappointing to his unnamed Christian friend (and perhaps also to Wiesel), Levi’s career-long characterization of his survival in Auschwitz-Monowitz as a simple matter of “good fortune” and “luck” is, of course, entirely consistent with his longstanding nonbelief.

### Jewish Identity

It is notable that on more than one occasion, the later Levi also insisted that his self-conception as a Jew was inaugurated during the years of persecution. Writing in 1975’s *The Periodic Table* about Italy’s implementation of its 1938 Race Laws, Levi autobiographically notes:

In truth, until precisely those months it had not meant much to me that I was a Jew: within myself, and in my contacts with my Christian friends, I

<sup>35</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 9, italics mine.

<sup>36</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 82.

<sup>37</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 180. Philip Roth’s September 1986 interview with Levi appears as the Afterword to Simon & Shuster’s 1996 edition of *Survival in Auschwitz*.

had always considered my origin as an almost negligible but curious fact, a small amusing anomaly, like having a crooked nose or freckles; a Jew is somebody who at Christmas does not have a tree, who should not eat salami but eats it all the same, who has learned a bit of Hebrew at thirteen and then has forgotten it.<sup>38</sup>

A year later, in a 1976 interview with friend and fellow survivor Edith Bruck tellingly titled “Jewish, Up to a Point,” she asks Levi what being Jewish means to him. He replies: “I was turned into a Jew by others. Before Hitler I was a middle-class Italian boy. The experience of the Race Laws helped me to recognize, amongst the many threads that made up the Jewish tradition, a number that I could accept.”<sup>39</sup> Levi will return to this theme of being “turned into a Jew by others”<sup>40</sup> in the 1980s, employing even more vivid imagery, in conversation with Camon.

Camon: “You’re not a believer?”

Levi: “No, I never have been. I’d like to be, but I don’t succeed.”<sup>41</sup>

Camon: “Then in what sense are you Jewish?”

Levi: “A simple matter of culture. If it hadn’t been for the racial laws and the concentration camp, I’d probably no longer be a Jew, except for my last name. Instead, this dual experience, the racial laws and the concentration camp, stamped me the way you stamp a steel plate. At this point I am a Jew, they’ve sewn the Star of David on me and not only on my clothes.”<sup>42</sup>

This vivid image of his Jewishness being forcibly attached to him by others is picked up again in another interview from this period. “I became a Jew at Auschwitz. Awareness of my difference was forced upon me. Someone, for

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<sup>38</sup> Levi, *The Periodic Table*, 35–36.

<sup>39</sup> Bruck, “Jewish, Up to a Point,” 262.

<sup>40</sup> Levi, *The Voice of Memory*, 262.

<sup>41</sup> This theme of *wanting* to be a believer recurs periodically in Levi’s life and work. Giuseppe Platone notes that in a 1975 conversation Levi defined himself as “*una persona in ricerca*,” “a man in search of faith” (in Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 345). Writes Thomson: “Levi envied believers—the more so, the older he got—and wished he could believe in God.” Thomson quotes the later Levi: “To have a father, a judge, a teacher would be good, calming” (in Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 345).

<sup>42</sup> Camon, *Conversations with Primo Levi*, 67–68.

no earthly reason had established that I was different and inferior ... In making me feel a Jew, it helped me to recover a cultural inheritance which I previously did not possess.”<sup>43</sup> Of course, it is no coincidence that Levi here refers to his belated “cultural inheritance” as a Jew, rather than anything religious.

Finally, it is well to note that Levi’s discomfort with others attempting to force a Jewish identity upon him extends well beyond the years of persecution. He was famously outspoken in his condemnation of Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and was roundly criticized, especially by conservative Italian Jews, for this perceived disloyalty.<sup>44</sup> In an interview with the newspaper, *La Stampa* Levi said that he felt “anguish and shame” at Israel’s actions, and confessed to a friend: “Sometimes I wonder if I belong to the Jewish people at all.”<sup>45</sup> Three years later, during a successful lecture tour of the United States, Levi “was puzzled by why the Americans had made such a song and dance of his Jewishness. He was a chemist as well as a writer; Judaism was just one of the things that interested him. To friends in Turin, he complained that the Americans had ‘pinned a Star of David’ on him.”<sup>46</sup> Revealingly, during the New York portion of the lecture tour, Levi warned the book publicist escorting him in the city that he “did not want to be pigeonholed in New York as a Jewish writer: [adding] ‘I don’t like labels—Germans do.’”<sup>47</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

In his final book, 1986’s *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi reflects: “I too entered the Lager as a nonbeliever, and as a nonbeliever I was liberated and have lived to this day.”<sup>48</sup> While religious belief is not a dominant theme in Levi’s Holocaust writing, we have seen that over the course of a forty-year writing career, this nonbeliever offered a number of thoughtful and provocative

<sup>43</sup> Mendel, “Primo Levi and the Jews,” 61.

<sup>44</sup> Following Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, Levi—who objected above all to Prime Minister Begin’s appeal to Jewish victimization under the Nazis in his explanation of Israeli military action—published an open letter against Begin in the newspaper *La Repubblica*. The letter, which demanded that Israel withdraw its troops from Lebanon and cease construction of settlements in occupied territories, led to considerable hostility toward Levi from Jewish friends and strangers (including Elie Wiesel). “Italy’s conservative Jews were furious with Levi. Who was Levi to judge? He was not acquainted with any of the distinguished Israelis in politics and his knowledge of Palestinian politics was non-existent. An icy contretemps developed between Levi and his pro-Israeli friends” (Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 399, 402, 416).

<sup>45</sup> In Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 402.

<sup>46</sup> Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 442–43.

<sup>47</sup> Thomson, *Primo Levi*, 433.

<sup>48</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 145.

reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust. Even the early Levi's dispassionate and detailed account of his year of imprisonment and slave labor, *Survival in Auschwitz*—which devotes scant attention to such topics—raises penetrating questions about the problematic character of religious belief and prayer in the context of the Holocaust.

In his post-*Survival* writing and interviews, we find Levi digging deeper, and with increasing frequency, into matters concerning God, faith, and the Holocaust. From the recurring charge of “blasphemy” which he directs both at religious believers and nonbelievers, to his career-long characterization of his unlikely survival as a matter of luck rather than Divine Providence, the later Levi explores matters related to God and the Holocaust with increasing regularity and subtlety. And as we have seen, the notable idea that the years of persecution brought with them a newfound self-conception as a Jew is also a recurring one in Levi's later works. By examining his thoughts on how his Auschwitz imprisonment simultaneously confirmed his nonbelief and inaugurated his self-conception as a Jew, I trust I have made the case that Primo Levi's scattered reflections on God, faith, and the Holocaust are thoughtful, provocative, and well worth our careful, continued study.

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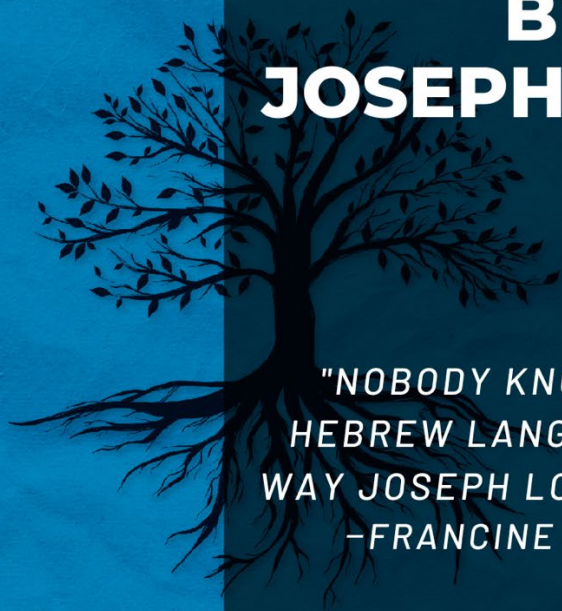
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# HEBREW MATTERS

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HEBREW LANGUAGE THE  
WAY JOSEPH LOWIN DOES."  
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110 HEBREW ROOTS  
THE ROADS THEY TAKE  
THE STORIES THEY TELL